

Online Family Trees: Avoiding Pitfalls and Maximizing Discoveries

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Online Family Trees: Blessing or Curse?

Genealogists frequently bemoan the inaccuracies and difficulties of using online family trees. However, as with any form of user-contributed content, the accuracy of an online tree is directly related correlated to the individual(s) who have submitted the data. **Most importantly, like all genealogical tools, online trees require a specific degree of analysis and interpretation when used in our research.**

Compiled family trees have a long history of use in genealogical research. Before computers compiled genealogies linking numerous generations of a family were published and distributed throughout the world. While their pages are often devoid of citations or other bibliographic references, each compiled genealogy represents a potential resource for genealogical study.

Online trees have become an essential (and unavoidable) research tool. Together they represent billions of compiled names, dates, and locations. Yet, every name (and thus every family tree) is not worth the same level of time and consideration during your research. We must **constantly evaluate online family trees on their own terms**, recognizing their limitations, and look for ways to maximize their use.

FIRST: Expand Your Search

There are multiple resources to find online family trees, all of which should be taken into account as you venture through your research. To truly maximize the possibilities of online family trees, **conduct a thorough search of all major family tree databases**, not just one or two. A select list of resources for online family trees include:

- Ancestry.com (search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1030)
- FamilySearch (www.familysearch.org/tree)
- Findmypast (www.findmypast.com)
- Geni (www.geni.com)
- MyHeritage (www.myheritage.com/research)

- WeRelate (www.werelate.org)
- WikiTree (www.wikitree.com)

NEXT: Compare Multiple Online Trees

An important step in maximizing the possibilities of online family trees is to search for, and compare, family trees across multiple providers. Consider these three questions:

1. Is the information the same across multiple trees? If not, what are the differences?
2. What date(s) was the information last updated? How often is the tree updated by the user?
3. Is the tree specific to resources available on the website where it resides?

THEN: Determine the Source of the Tree

Finding the “source” of any tree can be difficult – as most online trees are cobbled together from a variety of sources. Be on the lookout for trees that originated from older versions of compiled trees, such as:

World Family Tree

Often abbreviated as WFT, World Family Tree was a CD-based compiled tree produced in volumes by Brøderbund Software.

Ancestral File

Sometimes seen as AF, the Ancestral File was an early database of compiled trees produced by the LDS Church. Entries in the Ancestral File were often merged through slightly imperfect processes, causing a great deal of confusion and inaccurate entries.

Pedigree Resource File

Sometimes seen as PRF or PR, the Pedigree Resources File was a CD-based tree produced by the LDS Church as a successor (of sorts) to the Ancestral File.

International Genealogical Index

Often referred to as the IGI, the International Genealogical Index was a database produced by the LDS Church from individual extracted and user-submitted records.

Not necessarily intended to be a lineage-linked family tree, the database is often seen today as elements of databases covering an entire state or country's birth, marriage, and death records (for example: California Births, 1800-1940).

ALWAYS: Analyze Citations

An online tree filled with citations and attached records can be *just as inaccurate* as a tree without any citations. Why? Citations themselves require analysis. An online family tree might be filled with citations that only cite other trees, which in turn reference yet another set of online trees. Take time to evaluate citations within an online family tree with these five questions:

1. How were the citations created? Were they automated?
2. What type of materials are cited? Is it only material found on a specific website?
3. Does the citation format conform to an accepted style?
4. How in-depth are the citations? Do they cover each date or only a selection of materials?
5. Does the citation indicate the user has actually examined the original document?

BE SURE TO: Look Past the Citations

The ideal online tree includes full citations for every name and fact, alongside images of each document, and an in-depth analysis for each branch of the family tree. Very few trees reach this esteemed (and desired) level. However, an online tree void of citations or other references should not immediately be looked down upon or cast aside during research. A keen researcher will take time to examine and analyze the tree's contents. Consider working through these five key questions when looking at the consistency of an online tree's data:

1. Are there full dates (i.e., day, month, and year) or estimated years?
2. Are there full listings for locations (city, county, state, country) or more specific listings (for example, the name of a hospital or cemetery, etc.)?

3. Does the tree have multiple dates for single events? If so, can you determine why?
4. Are there duplicate children and/or spouses in the family tree? Can you identify the source of those duplicates?
5. Are there consistent patterns (i.e. every generation only has one child, no one has a death date, etc.), that you can identify?

AND REMEMBER: Go Beyond the Online Tree

Take time to evaluate the creator of the online family tree. Search online for the username and/or email address if needed. Direct contact, through an email or internal messaging system, can also be beneficial. When looking at the tree's creator ask yourself these five questions:

1. Why was the tree created in the first place?
2. Is the tree "active" or has the user moved on to other projects?
3. Is the user an active researcher, a "name-gatherer," or someone else?
4. Is the user a member of any genealogical societies or organizations?
5. Does the user conduct all their research online – or do they venture out to various repositories?

Final Thoughts

As you continue to integrate online trees into your research, remember:

- Online trees are research tools that require evaluation and analysis (just as any other resource).
- An online tree might be the "tip of the iceberg" or the complete picture.
- Use logic and reasoning – understanding that errors are human.
- Trees can help populate automated searches, therefore they are a necessary tool that can often lead you astray.